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Re-envisioning my backyard, one brick at a time

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RE-ENVISIONING MY BACK YARD,
ONE BRICK AT A TIME

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
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Abstract

My work is inspired by my immediate environment. I am especially interested in places which exhibit visual evidence of history, of industrial, natural and human life and the corresponding cycles of building, abandonment, destruction and salvage. In Baton Rouge, these relationships are dramatic, the lush vegetation, birds and overwhelming presence of industry make this interplay constantly tangible.

My current work began with the phenomenal concerns within the struggle of nature and industry. Newly built industry is highly ordered, the perfect symbol of not only technology, but also control. However, older industry is more chaotic, with the initial order obscured over time. Nature rusts components, plants grow wildly around the wires and repairs and odd added parts disrupt perfect patterns of the original designs. Older factories are no longer symbols of technology and control, but technology and nature and their interaction over time.

My work, modular ceramic building blocks or bricks, is a response to this environment. Their design integrates many aspects of both nature and industry, geometry, repetition and fitting parts. The bricks vary reflecting the various stages of erosion or entropy.

While working and investigating, I have become interested not only in natural phenomenon but also in landscape and the built environment. In these spaces, it is impossible not to think about why something was built, abandoned or destroyed. The larger social issues, including class and environmental issues, have come to the surface. With this new focus, a series of exploratory, temporary, collaborative, site projects were executed at various sites in Baton Rouge. In these projects, the work exists in the same spaces in which it was inspired.

Introduction

My work is inspired by my immediate environment. I am especially interested in places which exhibit visual evidence of history, of industrial, natural and human life and the corresponding cycles of building, abandonment, destruction and salvage. *Re-envisioning My Backyard, One Brick at a Time* brings often ignored or unnoticed spaces into the forefront as part of a contemplation about our built and natural environment and the choices we make in creating it. This thesis project consists of two main components: the design and making of hundreds of ceramic building elements or bricks and a series of exploratory, temporary, collaborative, site projects using these bricks in the landscape.

For many years my work has investigated facets of these ideas, first nature and architecture, then nature and the mechanical, and finally nature and industry. However, when I moved to Baton Rouge, I was struck by how dramatic these relationships are in this particular landscape. The lush vegetation, the birds, and the overwhelming presence of industry make this interplay constantly tangible. In response, I began investigating, biking and driving through industrial and commercial strips, and slowly, over the past few years, these research expeditions have impacted my work.

During these explorations, I became interested in power substations. This infrastructure not only plays a part in our natural and manmade environment, but is an example of heavy industry which is ubiquitous, existing not only in industrial strips, but in our neighborhoods. Because these substations are so common and typically considered ugly, they are generally ignored, preferred as walled off and out of sight.

My thesis work began with the phenomenal concerns within the struggle of nature and

industry. New substations are ordered and new, perfect symbols of not only technology, but also control. However, older substations are more chaotic, with the initial order obscured over time. Nature rusts components, plants grow wildly around the wires and repairs and odd added parts disrupt perfect patterns of the original designs. Older stations are no longer symbols of technology and control, but technology and nature and their interaction over time.

While working, my concerns shifted to the larger scope of this struggle. These substations, like many other human creations, especially those concerning energy use, are important in our daily lives, but have unpleasant environmental ramifications. It is my intent to bring these overlooked aspects of our built environment, spaces that go unnoticed, into focus in order to contemplate the choices we make when we create our environment.

The Bricks

The first aspect of my project consists of hundreds of ceramic building blocks which are a culmination of a series of designs inspired by power substations. The original unit comes directly from the shape of the power line insulator and subsequent designs from the insulator's negative space. The design evolved intuitively during the making process incorporating formal, conceptual, and functional concerns. The final design includes five interlocking bricks which allow the bricks to stack to create walls, arches, doors, windows, and corners.

The design integrates many aspects of my previous work including geometry, repetition, and fitting parts. In addition, the forms continue to be substantial and solid looking, with volume and edge being important formal components.

The bricks combine a variety of colors and textures. Some of the bricks are nearly perfect with clean lines, smooth texture, looking like they may have been newly manufactured rather than being made by hand. Other bricks, with natural textures, created from seeds and sawdust, make the bricks appear decayed, worn away, rusted or eaten, that they once may have been industrially made but have been abandoned, decayed or well used. There is a large variety of these reflecting the various stages of erosion or entropy.

The colors, a variety of greens along with red-brown earthenware were initially chosen for formal reasons. I continue to use these colors as they reflect my increased interest in landscape. In contrast, the brighter pink and green porcelain bricks are more toxic versions of the earthenware colors and reflect the manmade or industrial aspects of our environment.

While the work was inspired by nature and industry, other references have appeared in the work. Constructions with the bricks reference many things including the body, as spines or glands, as well as historical tiles which deal with repetitive shape and color.

The Sites

While investigating spaces which exhibit the interaction of nature and industry, I became less interested in natural phenomena, rust and erosion for example, and became more focused on the built environment. Spaces which showed a history of building, abandonment, destruction and salvage began to interest me. In these spaces, it is impossible not to think about why something was abandoned or destroyed. The larger social issues, class and environmental issues, come to the surface. Thus, while the bricks reflect concerns about the environment in abstract and material ways, I intend future work to have more cultural impact. The work will exist outside the gallery and in the landscape bringing the viewer into these spaces. This will allow the viewer to experience and contemplate the environments that we create, and the issues behind these environments, for themselves.

As a way to begin this new work, a series of exploratory, temporary, collaborative, site projects were executed at various sites in Baton Rouge. These collaborations were experiments intended to investigate and experience a range of spaces to help determine the direction of future work

Each of the projects investigated a different aspect of our built environment. The project sites include spaces where we live, work and play, some places undesirable, abandoned and neglected, some places mundane and ignored and some are wonderfully preserved in contrast to commercial surroundings.

Designed as architectural building blocks, the bricks were brought to the sites, into the spaces in which they were inspired. This allowed me to see both how the bricks would impact the built environment, but, more importantly, to experience and work in the spaces themselves.

Collaboration in these excursions was crucial. By including collaborators, the learning process was enhanced. Each person brought unique insights to the project; what sites, what issues and what projects are important or interesting. Discoveries were made that otherwise would not have been.

Likewise, I was able to bring people to the places that I have been thinking about. Having collaborators at the site made it possible to have a dialog about the sites with people who had first hand knowledge of it.

As I've become interested work outside the gallery space and in the exterior environment, I've begun to think more about community. The idea of working with other people rather than as a solitary artist, seems more appropriate. Finally, many of the spaces I was interested in did not feel safe to go to alone. Collaborating with others lent safety, help, and support.

The following sections describe the five site experiments. Each section includes the site location and description, documentation of the project, the experience, and conclusions.

Site One: Suburb Gracie

Collaborators

Cyndy Giachetti, John D'Ignazio, Anna Belenki, Sangduk Yu

Location

The first site is located at the corner of 16th and Gracie Streets on the edge of the neighborhood Suburb Gracie.

Description

Cut off from downtown by the interstate, a strip of wooded and undeveloped city land, and the Kansas City Southern Railroad, Suburb Gracie has a small town feel despite its proximity to downtown and its location within one of the cities moderately dense neighborhoods.

The site is a series of four vacant lots. Only one lot has a building, an old warehouse with high ceilings and big windows. The other lots are empty except for a series of identical front and back cement stairs, remnants of a series of old shotgun houses. The warehouse is overrun with vines and full to the rafters of junk, yet beautiful details, ornate doorknobs and hardware, remain intact. Today, the warehouse is used by a neighbor to store salvaged building materials. However, the other lots are primarily an illegal garbage dump site.

Site Selection

This site was investigated to figure out why this area, so close to downtown, was abandoned rather than prime real estate. Originally the area, which includes Suburb Gracie, was part of Spanish Town, a prosperous downtown neighborhood first settled in the early 19th century. However, today Suburb Gracie and Spanish Town have little in common and unlike Spanish Town, Gracie Suburb is impoverished, rundown and racially segregated.

After investigating the area as a whole, we picked this site because of its visible evidence of history. The attractive old building and the remnant of homes elude to a time when the area was more prosperous and less neglected and abused. This site demonstrates the possibilities and contradictions of the environments we create. On one half of the site, there is beautiful architecture and salvage, on the other layers of trash.

Project

We decided to build an arch over on of the old cement stairs to draw attention to the absent houses and to begin to imagine the possibilities for something new.

Our experience at Gracie is highlighted by a conversation with a police officer that stopped to investigate. His response to our project was that this does not happen here, other things happen here, not good things. He stayed and watched from across the street, he said for our safety, eluding to various crimes which had taken place at the site.

During the day, we experienced the undesirability of the site firsthand. The environment was threatening, physically through the rot of the garbage and emotionally because it did not feel safe, even on a Sunday afternoon.

While preparing for this thesis, I realized that I didn't have a good photo of the entire site. I drove back late one afternoon to shoot some pictures. When I got there, the weather was miserable, raining like the day we worked. More trash had been dumped, people were hanging around, I didn't feel safe. I drove slowly around the site and didn't even stop, I didn't get the picture and didn't want to be there.

Conclusion

This site suffers primarily from isolation. While the distance from Suburb Gracie to downtown is small, the infrastructure, the undeveloped land, the highway and the railroad, make this area less accessible and easy to ignore. In fact, spending time here, it feels like a different country. The poverty and racial segregation are easy to ignore because nobody has a reason to come here or even pass through.



Image 1: Gracie

Site Two: Acme Brick And Southern Block

Collaborators

Anna Belenki and Cyndy Giachetti

Location

4747 Choctaw Drive

Description

The second site, Acme Brick and Southern Block, is comprised of a cement block factory, cement block stacks and a brickyard. It is about five city blocks square. As you walk into the yard, there is a sand pit to the right and then beyond that is the cement factory building. The sales office is in front. Behind that are the cement and brick stacks.

The right half of the yard is all cement stacks, all about twenty feet high. The cement side is regularly stacked, tall and completely, evenly gray. There are a variety of block types for various industrial functions, especially to do with erosion, conduits and the oil industry. The left half of the yard is all brick stacks. The bricks are less regular and the stacks are shorter. The stacks look like small cities.

There is a neighborhood which surrounds the brick yard called Highland Gardens. The brickyard butts up against the back of the neighborhood. A series of backyards line the fence.

Site Selection

We chose this site because of its direct relationship to my ceramic work. Like the bricks and cement blocks, my work is modular building material and potentially a building product. In addition, this site relates directly to the built environment, both as a built environment itself and

as a place with materials used in creating our environment. Finally, this site is an industrial and commercial site that sits on the edge of a neighborhood, literally in people's backyards.

Project

The people at Acme Brick and Southern Block were very receptive to letting us work and photograph in the brickyard. They allowed us to stay for three days to work and photograph. We decided to build both sculptural and architectural brick formations on the lot using both the cement block stacks and the brick stacks. Basically for three days, we played with the bricks, moved them around to various sites and observed what happened.

Conclusion

Of all the sites, the brickyard was the most pleasant to work. It surprised me that this industrial environment was so clean, quiet and safe. The austerity of the cement stacks was calming and formally beautiful with clean lines, monumental stacks and uniform color. The site was also unexpectedly absent of workers and customers. Except for an occasional forklift operator, we worked alone. This allowed a very comfortable and unselfconscious work experience.

This site was the most successful from a sculptural perspective. The color, the architectural nature, and the modularity related directly to the site. The bright blue, chartreuse, and pink brick intervened in the austere environment to create a counterpoint to the traditional gray institutional color. The more muted earthenware worked well with the manufactured brick. The red brown clay blended with bricks and the greens and blues added subtle color.

Because the manufactured bricks were surprisingly varied and rough, my handmade bricks visually blended into the stacks. However, one dramatic way that my handmade bricks

did contrast was in sheer numbers. The slow and labor intensive process of hand making bricks was clear next to the endless stacks of easily and quickly made bricks.

In addition, the function of the manufactured cement block went far beyond the simple architectural functions of the traditional brick and my handmade brick. Many of the cement block designs were oddly shaped with erosion and conduit functions specifically designed for oil rigs. These designs made the function of both bricks seem very simple.

Finally, some of the employees enjoyed the constructions, it was satisfying to be able to bring the work somewhere unusual and have people see it.



Image 2: Acme Brick and Southern Block



Image 3: Acme Brick and Southern Block



Image 4: Acme Brick and Southern Block



Image 5: Acme Brick and Southern Block

Site Three: Meadow Park

Collaborator

Mira Henry

Location

Meadow Park Subdivision, east of Siegen Lane and north of Perkins Road in south Baton Rouge.

Description

Meadow Park serves young families whose homes are located in the Meadow Park subdivision. The park is bound by neighborhood houses, woods and the Interstate 10. Facilities include a baseball diamond, a playground area, a basketball court, a picnic area and a tennis court. There are remnants of an old volleyball court, as well. The park is nice, but is visually austere.

Meadow Park subdivision is small, two loops of houses surrounded on all sides by heavily trafficked suburban roads and strip malls. The neighborhood houses are on modest lots and each house is very similar if not identical to the rest.

Site Selection

Mira picked this site because she babysits in this subdivision and spends time here regularly. She thought that the park seemed well planned, spacious surrounded on two sides by homes and the woods on another. However, while it seemed like a nice design, the people in the neighborhood did not like or use the park. Thus, this site was picked as a built space that seems like it should work but doesn't.

Project

The most obvious thing about the neighborhood is that it is laid out on a grid. With this in mind, we took the bricks to the site and arranged the bricks in horizontal grids and lines responding to the layout of the neighborhood and the park.

Conclusion

However, while spending time here, the alienation of the space became apparent. There are no amenities within the neighborhood, no groceries, restaurants or schools. The only way to get anywhere is through heavy traffic along commercial strips. Thus, this space which on the surface seems nicely designed, fails to create any sense of community and fails as a leisure space.



Image 6: Meadow Park

Site Four: Catfish Town

Collaborator

Amy Santoferraro

Location

Catfish Town, Nicholson Substation and Beneath Interstate 10, both near Nicholson and South Blvd.

Description

The Nicholson Substation is much like any other substation, a grid of electrical equipment and towers, buzzing with electromagnetic energy. This station is completely visible, surrounded by a high chainlink fence. On two sides there are empty lots, on another a house. Across the street is the Sheraton.

Similarly, the area beneath Interstate 10 is much like any other place beneath a highway. There is a grid of cement columns supporting the highway and punctuating the space and the space is very noisy during rush hours. Houses line both sides of the infrastructure.

Site Selection

The substation and space under the interstate were both selected because they are a part of my daily environment. Like many people, I walk and drive by each, several times each day. The areas which surround both are undesirable, the substation due to electromagnetism, the highway, due to noise and pollution. For me, these spaces have come to stand for spaces and things that we wall out such as traffic, parking lots, factories and strip malls.

Project

I have been researching ancient, medieval and renaissance walled gardens as part of my

interest in the landscape. These walled gardens provided beautiful and controlled havens away from the wilderness. In these times, the wilderness was often seen as dangerous and full of beasts. Today, we still create walled gardens. However, instead of the natural environment, we protect ourselves from the stress of a busy environment largely of our own creation.

For the projects in Catfish Town, we created walled gardens as illustrations of this idea. We chose pink and green bricks, and used Amy's work, ceramic poodles, in whimsical opposition to the grey cement environments.

Conclusion

While walled gardens are havens from the rest of the world, obviously the things that we wall out still exist and should not be ignored. However, gardens are also a great example of positive things that we do create in our environment and much can be learned from them in creating a more positive world to live in.



Image 7: Catfish Town, Under Interstate 10



Image 8: Catfish Town, Power Substation

Site Five, Birdhouses at Cortana Mall

Birdhouse Collaborator

Leanne McClurg

Location

Oak Villa Blvd, Cortana Mall

Description

This site is located across the street from Walmart and Cortana Mall and contains a large birdhouse structure. The birdhouse looms above traffic on a busy access road as an artifact from a different time, looking very much like an outsider or folk piece of art.

Site Selection

Leanne contacted me because she had heard about my project and had several ideas for sites. We selected the birdhouse at Cortana Mall as an example of a fabulous built structure that is currently in a precarious state of existence. This artistic structure would be a positive attribute in many landscapes, but in this especially commercial area, it stands out as an example of unique construction opposing generic construction and generic brand products.

Project

For this project, first Leanne played with the bricks alone. She had no idea how they were meant to function and created a series of walls and lines in response to the structure of the birdhouse. Since she didn't know how the bricks functioned the wall was an odd arrangement of bricks, almost a folk art response to the birdhouses.

Second, we created a triangular wall to work with the pole of the structure and to draw attention to the birdhouses. This wall worked well with the birdhouse colors.

Conclusion

The birdhouse is an original and artistic design and has a positive effect on the landscape. It is an examples of the type of thing that should be built and that should be saved and renovated.

However, the birdhouse is currently overwhelmed by its commercial and sprawling surroundings and is in danger due to its lack of commercial value.



Image 9: Birdhouses at Cortana Mall

The Show

The ceramic work in the gallery reflects several goals. The arrangement begins with a demonstration of function. The tall pyramid or temple like structure and the low arch show the possibilities for architectural elements, walls, arched doors, and windows. The organization of the bricks flows from this functional presentation to a more chance arrangement reflecting the issues of building and decay, order and disorder, and nature verses industry.

They are arranged at the far end to be symmetrical, ordered, structural and monumental and then move across the room becoming less ordered, more horizontal, asymmetrical, less massive, and more whimsical. While the pyramid is complete, the rest of the arrangement is not. It is growing and decaying. While the arch is ordered it is only partially finished and too short to be of any use. The grids are not rectangular or square. Some have pieces removed or are made of half or quarter bricks breaking the grids into smaller sections.

The ceramic work displayed in the center of the room was meant to lead the imagination into the possibilities of what could be built in our environment and to allow the viewer a more physical understanding of the photographs and the site work.

The wall colors were picked to accentuate the colors of the bricks. The colors that I chose were blue and green Greys. These colors are typical exterior paint colors for homes, boats, businesses, factories. They are very ubiquitous. The wall color created a calm and contemplative atmosphere and differentiated the space from a common stark white gallery. The pink section at the door was selected as a festive color to work with the bright bricks and to contrast the somber grays.

The documentation of the sites is arranged on three of the walls surrounding the ceramic work. On two of the walls, text and large photographs briefly document each site, the collaborator,

and what was done at the site. This documentation brings the visitors of the gallery, if only in their imaginations, to the sites and introduces the possibilities of what can be done with these sites, these bricks and the built environment in general.

The third wall of documentation is a line of small 4x4 inch snapshots capturing the process at each site. This documentation highlights the experience of building and collaborating in the sites. The arrangement, the line, was selected to reflect the idea, that this work is a continuum, really the beginning of a project, rather than the end of a project.



Image 10: Thesis Show



Image 11: Thesis Show, detail



Image 12: Thesis Show, detail

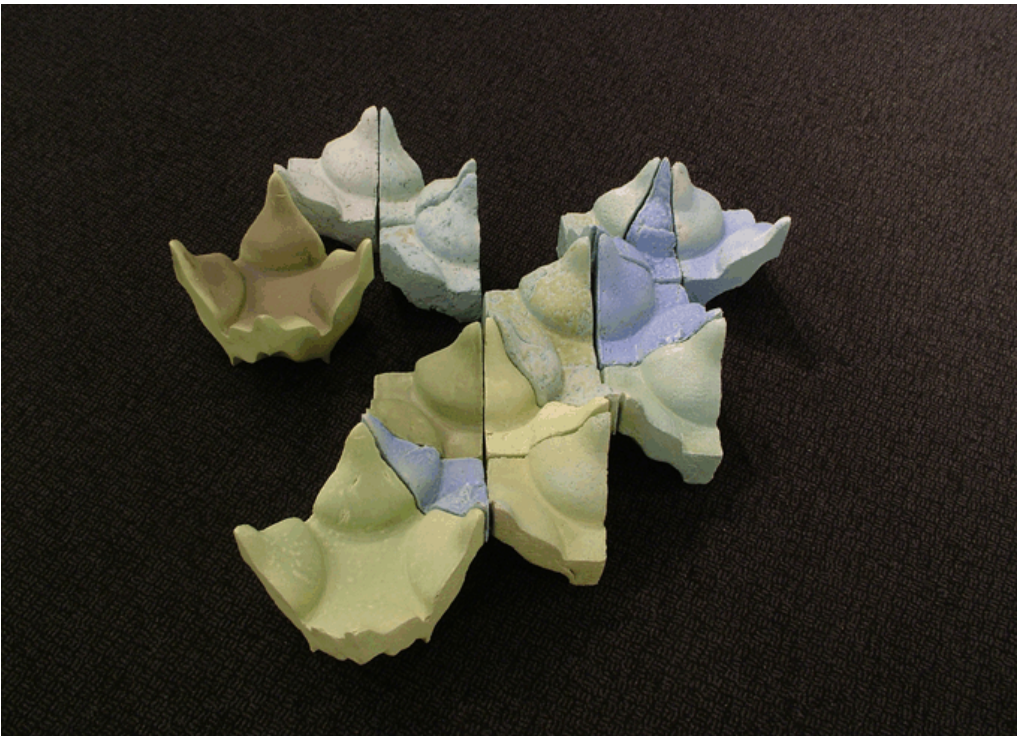


Image 13: Thesis Show, detail

Conclusion

This thesis project is the beginning of a new body of work. The new work begins with the old, the bricks and the interest in the interaction of nature and industry, and moves outside the gallery into the environment. The new work involves not only the interaction of nature and industry, but the built environment and its effects on our lives. The five short installation projects allowed me to experiment with collaboration and to work in some of the spaces which interest me. While comparing these sites, I was struck by how each of them are effected by some sort of isolation, the most undesirable being isolated by infrastructure. Infrastructure such as interstates, parkland, railroads, industrial belts, sprawling strip malls all have the ability to divide and isolate communities and it is these isolated sites then become easy to ignore. It is my intent, in my future work, to bring these alienating spaces and features of our environment into the forefront, perhaps creating a dialog about the choices we make when we create our environment.

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Vita

Kimberly Greene was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1965. She is the daughter of Kimber and Barbara L. Greene and the sister of David C. Greene. Kimberly was raised in Kentwood, Michigan, and graduated from East Kentwood Highschool in 1983. She studied electrical engineering at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, and was awarded a Bachelor of Science Degree in 1988. After working in industry, as an design engineer and computer programmer, Kimberly returned to college to pursue a fine arts education. First, she attended the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, Alfred, New York, and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in 2002. Then, she attended Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and will receive a Master of Fine Arts Degree in August, 2005.